

WANDA GREENE

BEHIND THE SCENES

She's the driver of a \$388 million organization and the head of one of the largest funders of health care, education and law enforcement in the region.

But Wanda Greene is not a name so widely known. The county manager does sometimes make the news, but mostly she is the voice behind Buncombe County politics, quietly steering the government ship through nearly two decades of tumultuous changes.

Those shifts have ranged from the dissolution of a state mental health care system that packed emergency rooms and homeless shelters

to a near fight to the death over countywide zoning that split residents and communities over private property regulation.

Greene said she's stayed with the job despite the political volatility because of its direct effect on people.

"I like that we can positively impact people's lives," she said.

Over the years, she said she had to learn that every service has "two customers" and one might not like what is being provided.

"When I'm flying down the road at 90 mph and pass a highway patrolman, I'm not interested in his service. But a person I just passed can't wait for me to have his service."

A tougher example, she said, might be when county-funded sheriff's deputies have to respond to a 2 a.m. domestic situation and then have to call a county social worker to come take custody of a 2-year-old child.

Greene was born in Haywood County and went to high school there, later living around the country as a military spouse with stops in places such as Minnesota and California before circling back to WNC.

When she applied for assistant county manager in 1994, Greene said then-commissioner Bill Stanley asked why she wanted to return, "then he answered the question himself," she said. "The mountains get into your blood, don't they?" Stanley said to her. Greene said she nodded.

She became manager in 1997, and it wasn't many years after that the state dissolved its mental health care system, handing care over to private contractors. Seeing that the most vulnerable patients could be set adrift, Greene and other near-

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by county managers made the key decision to keep control of the assets — the \$18 million in patient rooms, treatment facilities and other buildings. That and more recent moves to divert people in mental health crisis from emergency rooms has reduced fiscal and human costs.

Another large shift came in 2007, when Buncombe, without countywide zoning, added the land-use regulations despite an entrenched fight against them. The

change represented a culture clash that Greene has had to manage between many long-time residents pushing back against government regulation and newcomers who often expect more government involvement.

"You have to listen," she said. "You have to see and hear the value that people bring and then you have to balance it with other opinions who may not have shown up at the same meeting."